

Agenda Item No: 5

Report to: Overview and Scrutiny (Services)

Date of Meeting: 14th February 2013

Report Title: Hastings Castle Future Management Options

Report By: Kevin Boorman
Head of Marketing and Communications

Purpose of Report

To report on the work of the review team set up by the Overview & Scrutiny Committee (Services) on the future management options for Hastings Castle.

Recommendation(s)

- 1. That the Heritage Lottery Fund bid be deferred until autumn 2013**
- 2. A group attractions ticket covering the Blue Reef Aquarium, Smugglers Adventure, Hastings Castle and the West Hill Lift be trialled for the 2013 summer season**
- 3. Should the Heritage Lottery Fund bid be unsuccessful, the Council reviews the long term options for operating the castle with a partner organisation, with the intention of delivering significant improvements to the site in time for the 950th anniversary of the Battle of Hastings in October 2016**
- 4. The review team re-convene in October 2013 to review the 2013 season and the success of the combined attractions ticket**

Reasons for Recommendations

1 Because Hastings Pier was awarded £11.4m from the Heritage Lottery Fund in November 2012, it is felt unlikely that another major bid for funding would be successful if submitted by March 2013 as originally planned

2 To see if a combined ticket increases visitor numbers to the castle (and improves the financial position of the West Hill Lift)

3 To ensure that the visitor offer at Hastings Castle is significantly improved by this milestone date

4 This will help inform future marketing/pricing decisions in respect of the castle

Introduction

1. The scrutiny review was set up to consider future management operations for Hastings Castle, acknowledging that the redrafted bid for Heritage Lottery Funding ('HLF') may not be successful; to produce a range of options that are both dependent and independent of HLF funding; and to outline strengths and weaknesses of options considered and state review preferences and associated recommendations to Cabinet.
2. The review team held five meetings, a site visit to Hastings Castle, and an interview with the Manager of Smugglers Adventure, the privately-owned attractions operator who currently manage and operate Hastings Castle.

Current Position

3. As noted above, Hastings Castle is currently managed from the long-established Smugglers Adventure attraction, situated in St Clement's Caves around 500m to the east, across the West Hill. Smugglers Adventure is owned by 'Aspro', one of the largest leisure park operators in Europe, with its headquarters in Madrid, Spain.
4. Hastings Castle was run directly by Hastings Borough Council from the early 1950s, when the Council bought the site, until November 2009, when the day to day operation passed over to Aspro, who pay a fixed rental for the site. The current arrangement with Aspro expires in December 2014.
5. When operated by Hastings Borough Council, the castle was managed by a supervisor, and a mix of permanent and casual staff. Some difficulties were experienced in its day to day operation, primarily caused by short-term sickness and the difficult in getting casual cover in at very short notice. Visitor figures varied considerably, and at quieter times it was common for the two staff on duty to outnumber visitors. Problems were also experienced with minor damage and vandalism, which was sometimes costly to repair.
6. The current arrangements appear to work well in as much as the day to day operational responsibility of the castle is outsourced, with Aspro's fixed rental greatly reducing the Council's risk. Aspro also use their own in-house team for minor repairs, helping to speed the repair time and reduce costs. In addition, Aspro are required to annually repaint all iron work, including the gates, improve visitor interpretation, and refurbish the 'siege tent' audio visual presentation.
7. However, there is much that could be improved at the castle. The 'siege tent' (actually portacabins) is well past its 'sell by' date; erected in the mid-1980s with an expected ten year life, it is in a poor state of repair. The audio visual display inside, originally a slide show, now uses CD but is again dated, and can disappoint visitors. The toilets on site are, frankly, very poor indeed; they are not fully accessible. Indeed, much of the castle is not accessible to disabled visitors.

8. When the review team met Aspro's manager responsible for Smugglers' Adventure and the castle towards the end of September, he reported that visitor numbers to the castle were expected to be just over 40 000 this year; around 15 000 of these were to the Castle only, the rest were using 'combined' tickets, and were mainly student groups as at that time combined tickets were only available to groups of ten or more. This is a very low figure given the c100 000 visitors to Smugglers' Adventure (itself relatively difficult to find) and the visitor numbers enjoyed by other attractions in the town. Hastings Castle is, of course, a scheduled ancient monument and the only direct link the town has with the battle which has made it internationally famous. It is clear that there is potential to very significantly increase the number of visitors to Hastings Castle.

9. The review team are absolutely convinced of the need to improve facilities at Hastings Castle, which fall far below what is expected by visitors to major attractions these days. Certainly the facilities at Hastings Castle compare very poorly with those of all of the other attractions in Hastings.

The Future

10. A bid to HLF for funding to make significant improvements to Hastings Castle, submitted in early 2011, was not successful. However, HLF have given detailed feedback and they have indicated that they would be happy to see a revised bid, and in principle are keen to support improvements to Hastings Castle.

10. In parallel to the work of this review team, a revised bid is being prepared for HLF funding. It had originally been intended to submit this bid by the end of March 2013, but in November 2012 HLF confirmed the award of £11.4m towards the restoration of Hastings pier. This was extremely welcome news for Hastings, but the review team, and others, feel that it would not be appropriate to submit another bid for major funding for a Hastings project so soon after this award.

11. The 950th anniversary of the Battle of Hastings takes place in, of course, October 2016, and this is thought to be an ideal date to target for re-opening an improved visitor experience at Hastings Castle. This is felt to be achievable if an HLF bid is submitted in the autumn of 2013.

12. HLF have indicated previously that they are not able to make grants to privately-owned/managed companies, so it would not be possible for the existing operation with Aspro to continue if Hastings Castle were to receive an HLF grant.

Discussion

12. The review team felt that more needed to be done to market Hastings Castle in the short term, and was keen that HBC should work more closely with Aspro in the short term. It was noted that Aspro were introducing a combined 'Hastings Attractions' ticket for the summer of 2013, covering their sites in Hastings (Underwater World, Smugglers' Adventure, and Hastings Castle), and it was felt that we should include the West Hill Lift in this promotion. It should encourage more people to use the West Hill Lift, and visit the castle.

13. It was also noted that Aspro were making minor improvements as part of their short term lease. It was agreed that, if the HLF bid were unsuccessful, the Council review the long term options for operating the castle with a partner organisation, with the intention of delivering significant improvements to the site in time for the 950th anniversary of the Battle of Hastings in October 2016.

14. The team were interested in achieving short term increases in visitor numbers, and improvements to the site, in partnership with Aspro, and it was also felt that the review team should re-convene in October 2013 for a one-off meeting to review the 2013 season and the outcomes of the joint ticket arrangements involving Aspro's Hastings attractions and the West Hill Lift.

Recommendations

- 1) That the Heritage Lottery Fund bid be deferred until autumn 2013
- 2) A group attractions ticket covering the Blue Reef Aquarium, Smugglers Adventure, Hastings Castle and the West Hill Lift be trialled for the 2013 summer season
- 3) Should the Heritage Lottery Fund bid be unsuccessful, the council reviews the long term options for operating the castle with a partner organisation, with the intention of delivering significant improvements to the site in time for the 950th anniversary of the Battle of Hastings in October 2016
- 4) The review team re-convene in October 2013 to review the 2013 season and the success of the combined attractions ticket.

Wards Affected

Castle

Area(s) Affected

Central Hastings

Policy Implications

Please identify if this report contains any implications for the following:

Equalities and Community Cohesiveness	No
Crime and Fear of Crime (Section 17)	No
Risk Management	Yes
Environmental Issues	No
Economic/Financial Implications	Yes
Human Rights Act	No
Organisational Consequences	Yes
Local People's Views	Yes

Background Information

None

Officer to Contact

Kevin Boorman
kboorman@hastings.gov.uk
Hastings 451123
